

Savannah's Historic Street and Sidewalk Pavements: Threats and Opportunities
Prepared for Savannah City Manager Rob Hernandez by Robin B. Williams, Ph.D.
March 27, 2017

General Goal and Benefits:

Situate Savannah at the forefront of the preservation and celebration of its built landscape heritage – streets, sidewalks, curbs, historic urban features (embedded signage, stone light-well frames, etc.), landscape designs of squares. Currently there is no protection for such elements.

So few cities having taken formal steps to protect their built landscape heritage, Savannah has the potential to be a national model and leader.

Preserving and celebrating historic pavement has been shown to strengthen civic and neighborhood pride, including in historically underprivileged areas where such pavements often survive, and improves property values, which increases the tax base.

Overview of Savannah's Historic Street and Sidewalk Pavement:

- Largest variety of surviving historic street and sidewalk pavements and curbs of any other U.S. city in a concentrated area (only Philadelphia may have more, but spread across a vast area)
- Among the cities with the greatest extent of historic pavements
- Most extensive amount of cobblestones in the U.S.
- One of only two cities with extensive asphalt blocks (Richmond, VA, is the other)
- Only city with distinctive triangular patterns of blocks in T-shaped intersections around the squares
- Tree lawns are an important characteristic of Savannah and resulted from the introduction of street pavement in the late 19th century; many tree lawns retain historic slate curbs on their inner side

Benefits of Retaining Historic Street and Sidewalk Pavement:

- Plays a critical role in defining the urban identity of Savannah, along with squares, trees and historic buildings
- Historic pavement is a significant part of the built heritage of the city since the early 1800s for sidewalks and since the 1850s for street pavement
- Most publicly accessible form of public heritage and found in different areas of the city
- Strengthens neighborhood pride
- Increased property values – 25% for existing houses; up to 200% for vacant lots
- Durable – historic pavements need less frequent maintenance than modern asphalt
- Cheaper in the long term
- Traffic calming – the texture of bricks and blocks causes drivers to slow down
- Permeability – water can seep through gaps between pavers

Threats:

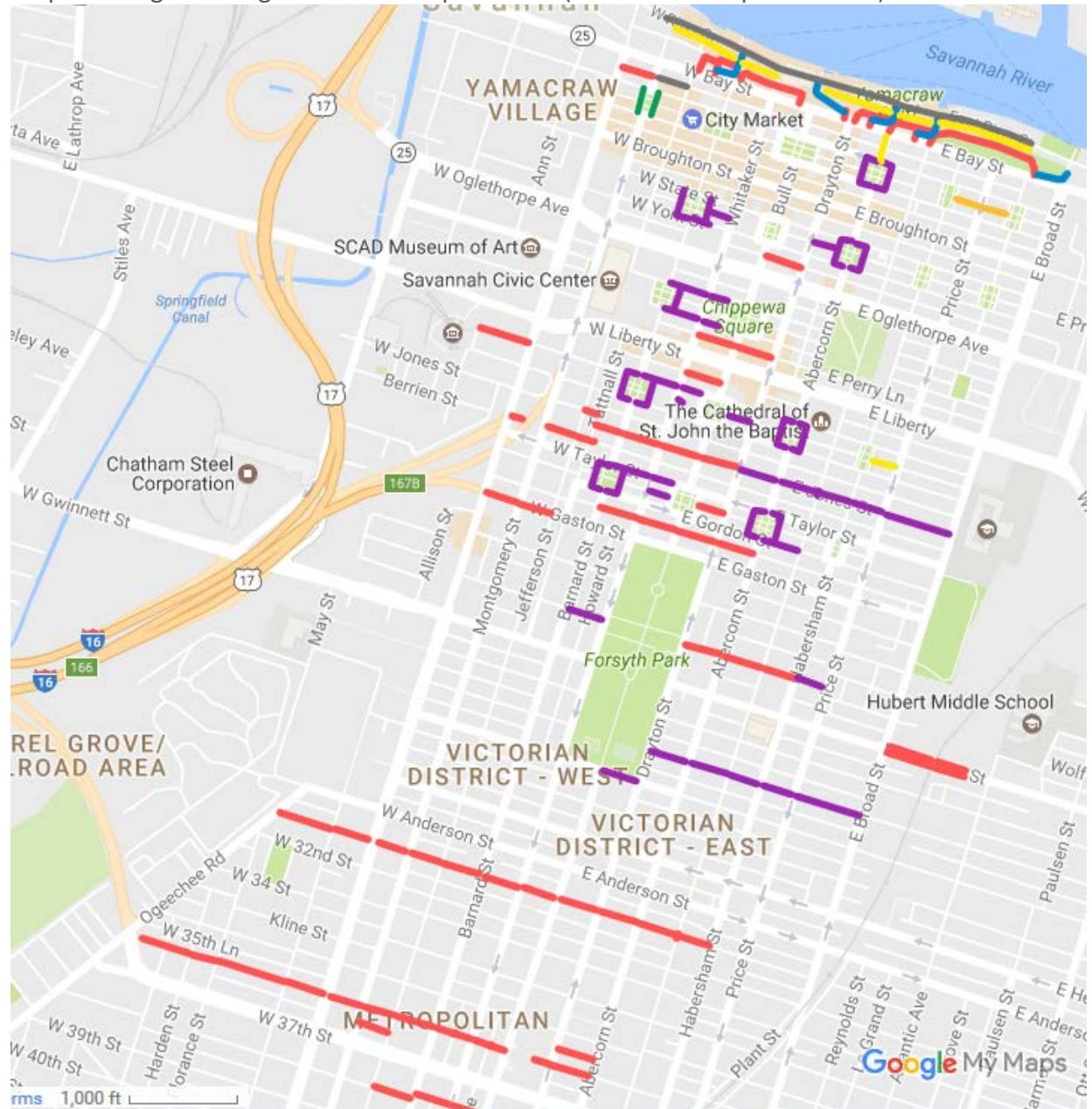
1. Recent removal of historic pavement
 - Whitaker Ramp, lower half – cobblestones removed in 2014 and replaced with stamped concrete
 - East Broughton Street from East Broad to Randolph – 700 linear feet of asphalt blocks removed in 2015, replaced with regular asphalt
 - Randolph Street north from President St – 540 linear feet of asphalt blocks removed in 2015, replaced with regular asphalt
 - West Perry Street between Montgomery and MLK Jr. Blvd -- asphalt blocks covered with new asphalt in 2016
 - East State Street in front of the MPC -- asphalt blocks replaced in 2014 with pervious pavers (historic triangular laying pattern replicated)
 - West York Street between Bull and Whitaker – asphalt blocks replaced in 2015 with pervious pavers (historic triangular laying pattern not replicated)
 - Dixie Pawn Shop embedded hex tile advertisement (c.1930) removed Sep. 2016
2. Utility manhole covers surrounded by a large square of concrete replacing historic paving materials, especially noticeable on River Street and the cobblestone ramps
3. New rectangular utility access panels are being cut without care into historic sidewalks and cutting through historic curbs, with often messy results

Potential Actions:

- create an ordinance protecting historic street and sidewalk pavements (on the model of the new Treelawn ordinance) with guidelines for maintenance and procedures for repairs, including utility cuts
- create a Historic Street Paving Thematic District within the National Register of Historic Places on the model of the one in Philadelphia, which is unique in the country
- restore sections of historic pavements removed around manhole utility cuts
- complete the survey of historic street and sidewalk pavements and curbing in SAGIS and make public
- Ensure that historic paving materials are on the list of eligible paving materials for use today
- Reinstall historic concrete street sign pylons that are stored at Laurel Grove Cemetery
- expose historic pavement where feasible, removing the asphalt, such as:
 - lower part of East Broad Street Ramp (cobblestones)
 - lower part of Drayton Ramp under the Cotton Exchange (cobblestones)
 - Tattnell Street between West Charlton Lane and Berrien Street (vitrified brick)

SAVANNAH PRESERVES THE GREATEST VARIETY AND AMOUNT OF HISTORIC STREET PAVEMENT IN THE SOUTH – AND POSSIBLY IN THE COUNTRY

Map showing surviving historic street pavement (and modern reproductions):



LEGEND:

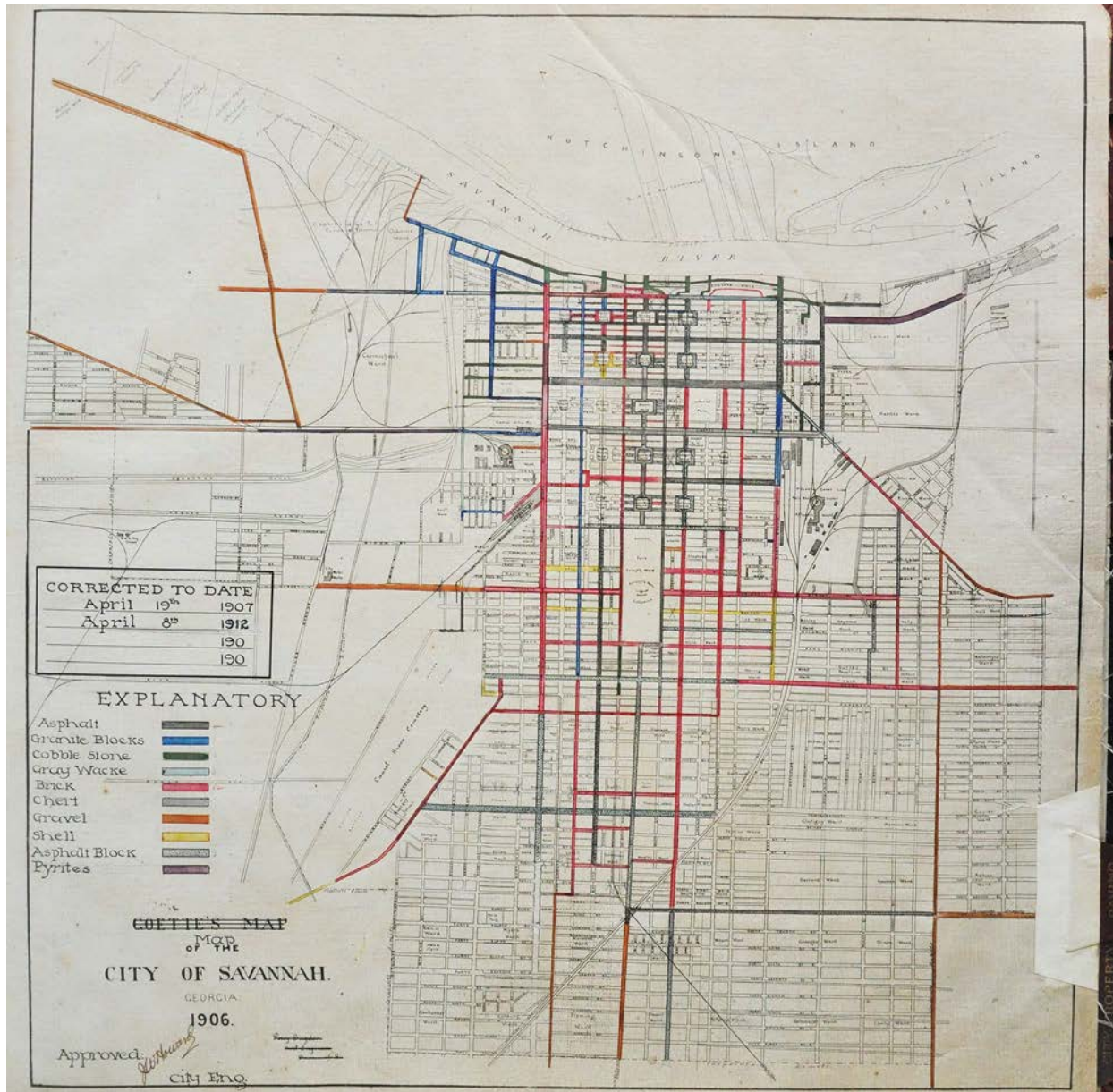
Historic Pavements:

— Cobblestones
 — Belgian Blocks
 — Vitrified Brick
 — Asphalt Blocks
 — Concrete

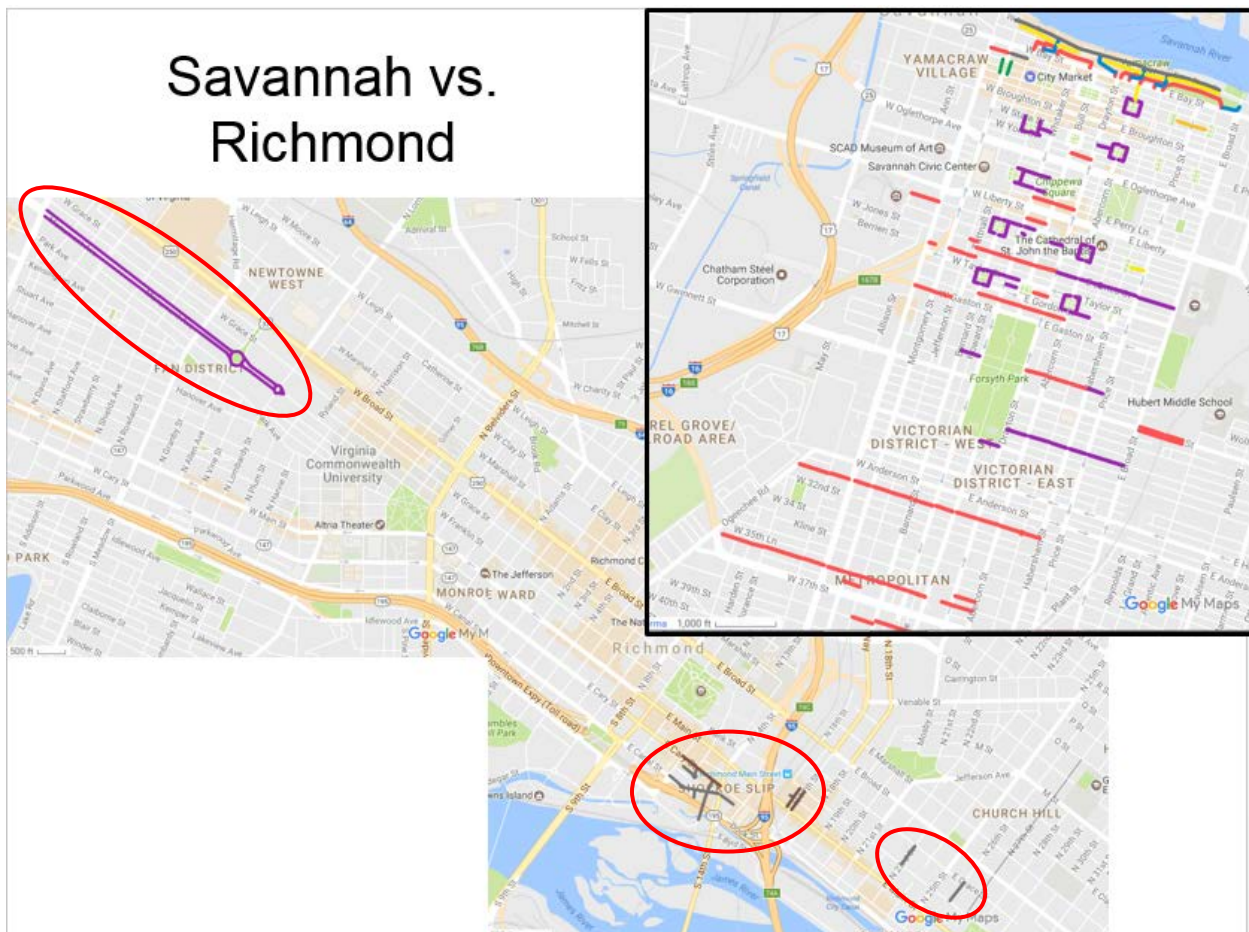
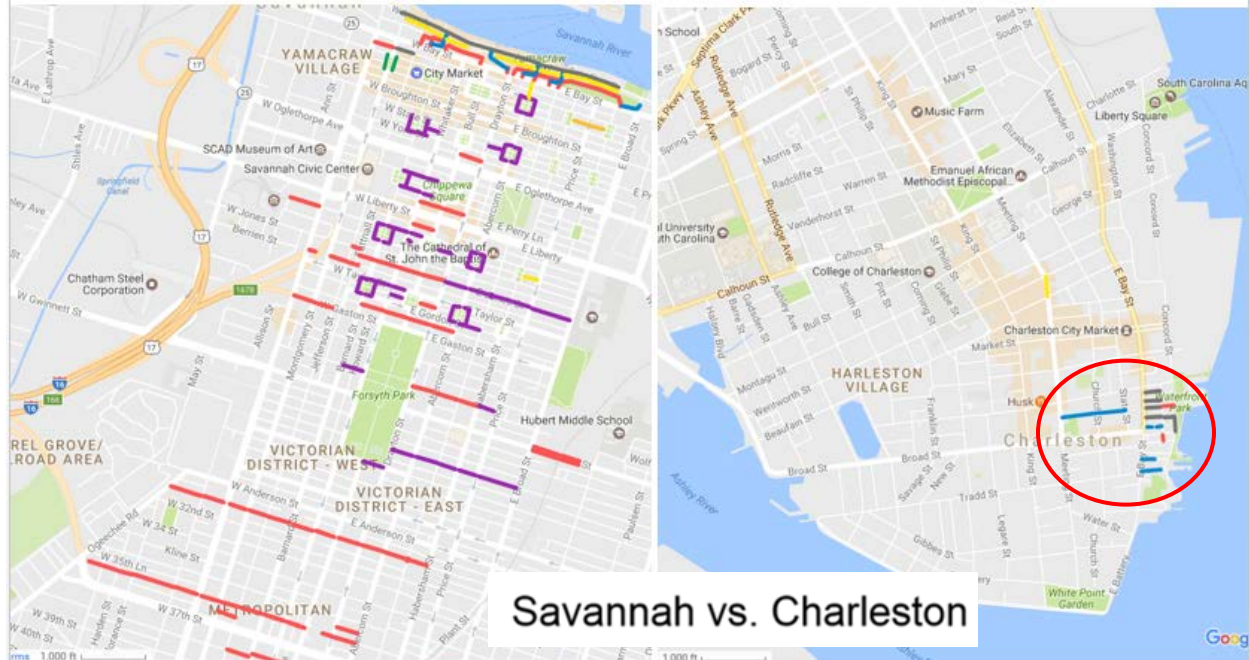
Modern Variant Pavements:

— Stamped Concrete
 — Concrete with Oyster Shell Aggregate

Historic Street Paving Map of Savannah, 1906, showing 10 different kinds of pavement (Engineering Map Book, City of Savannah Research Library and Municipal Archives):



Same-scale comparison of Savannah's historic street pavement to that in other Southern Cities, with zones of historic pavement in Charleston and Richmond circled:



SAVANNAH'S RICH PAVEMENT IDENTITY

HISTORIC STREET PAVEMENTS IN SAVANNAH:



Cobblestones



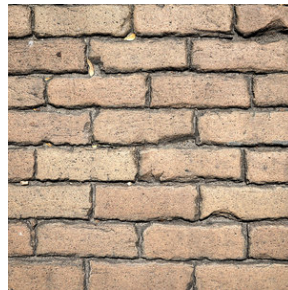
Granite Belgian Blocks



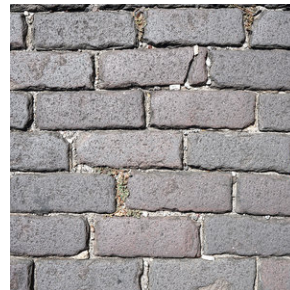
Slate Belgian Blocks



Vitrified Brick – Red



Vitrified Brick – Yellow



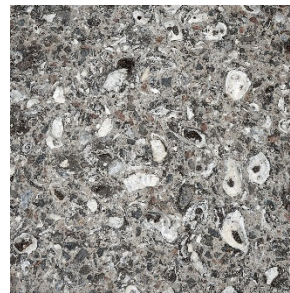
Vitrified Brick – Purple/Black



Asphalt Blocks



Concrete large granite
Aggregate (1910s-20s)



Concrete oyster shell
Aggregate (1950s)

HISTORIC STREET ELEMENTS IN SAVANNAH:



Embedded Signage

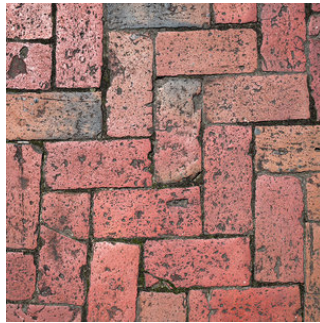


Manhole Covers

HISTORIC SIDEWALK PAVEMENTS IN SAVANNAH:



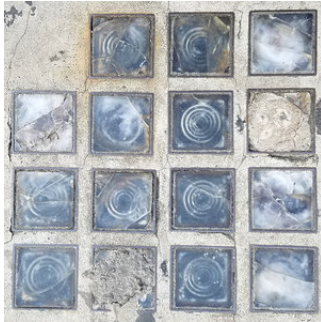
Flagstones



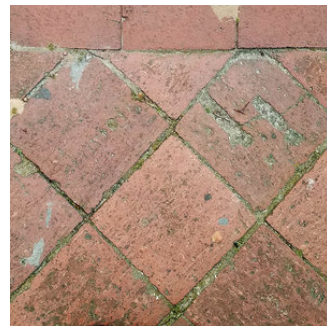
Hard-Pressed Bricks



Savannah Grey Bricks



Prismatic Glass



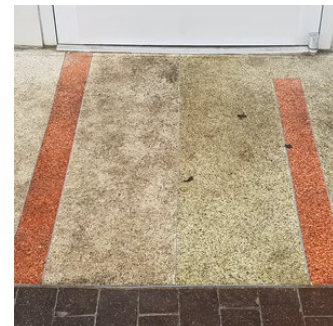
Hollow Square Brick



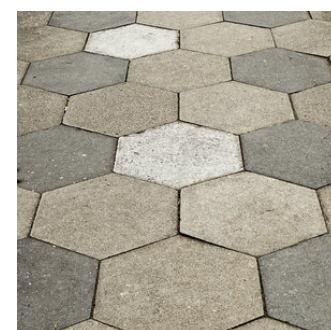
Cement



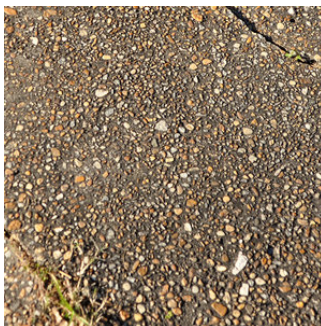
Glazed Vitrified Brick



Terrazzo



Hexagonal Concrete Pavers



Granitoid

HISTORIC CURBING IN SAVANNAH:



Slate



Granite



Marble



Sandstone



Masonry

OTHER HISTORIC SIDEWALK FEATURES:



Slate Manhole Frames



Metal Manhole Frames



Embedded Signage and Plaques



Historic Street Signs



Historic Utility Access Panels



Stone Light-Well Frames

THREATS -- RECENTLY REMOVED HISTORIC PAVEMENT:



Lost Cobblestones: Whitaker ramp in 2011 and today



Lost Belgian Blocks (and historic stop sign): East Broughton St. (Google Street view, Sep. 2012)



Lost Belgian Blocks: Randolph Street (Google Street view, Sep. 2012)



Lost Asphalt Blocks: West Perry St (Google Street view, Oct. 2014)



Lost Embedded Commercial Sign: East Broughton Street (Photo by author, Jul. 2016)



West York Street – lost historic asphalt blocks and historic triangular pattern



East State Street – lost historic asphalt blocks (removed in 2014), but the new pavers sympathetically replicated the historic triangular paving pattern

Unsympathetic Utility / Manhole concrete frames replacing historic paving materials



Sample damage caused by recent utility access door installations on sidewalks



OPPORTUNITIES:

1. New Ordinance Protecting Historic Street and Sidewalk Pavement and other historic street features

- Currently, only buildings and monuments are placed on the City of Savannah's Historic Preservation Map, which provides legal protection
- Identify qualifying historic pavements and other features using the same 50-year rule used for buildings
- Urban elements worth protecting:
 - Street pavements: Cobblestones, Belgian Blocks, Vitrified Bricks, Asphalt Blocks, Historic Concrete with large granite aggregate, 1950s Concrete with oyster shell aggregate)
 - Sidewalk pavements: Flagstone (blue stone), Historic Red Hard-Pressed Bricks, Savannah Grey Bricks, Prismatic Glass, Historic Cement (including "Artificial Stone"), Hollow Square Bricks, Glazed Stamped Vitrified Bricks, Terrazzo, 1950s Hexagonal Concrete Pavers, Granitoid)
 - Historic curbing (Slate, Granite, Marble, Sandstone); Masonry on Liberty and Oglethorpe?
 - Stone light-well frames
 - Embedded signage and plaques
 - Historic manhole covers and other historic utility access features (usually metal)
 - Historic Concrete street sign pylons with engraved street names
 - Historic orange bus stop signs

2. Create a Historic Paving Thematic Historic District (would be 2nd in nation after Philadelphia)

- Part of the National Register of Historic Places; complement Savannah's 10 neighborhood historic districts
- go beyond Philadelphia's to include sidewalk pavement and notable other features (such as signage)

PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES		FOR THE USE ONLY	
		RECEIVED	
		DATE ENTERED 9 December 1998	
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS			
1. NAME HISTORIC Historic Street Paving Thematic District AND/OR COMMON			
2. LOCATION STREET AND NUMBER Various, See inventory			
3. CLASSIFICATION			
CATEGORY		OWNERSHIP	STATUS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC <input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED <input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED
		PRESENT USE	
		<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM <input type="checkbox"/> PARK

3. Expose Historic Pavements covered with Asphalt



Such work has been done in Orlando, Florida. (See the useful video about the technique and benefits). <http://smoothroads.com/psi/brick-street-restor.html>



East Broad Ramp – historic cobblestones covered with asphalt



Iattnall Street – historic vitrified bricks covered with asphalt